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Plato's Machiavelli: Reconsidering Callicles' Speech in Plato's *Gorgias*

Presented at the
Southwest Social Science Conference (Austin, Tx), March 2017

Abstract:

Although often dismissed as a villain, Callicles' views about philosophy, politics, and human nature expressed in his speech in Plato's *Gorgias* criticizing Socrates turn-out to be similar to Socrates' own thoughts about philosophy, politics, and human nature when compared to Socrates' arguments in other dialogues such as the *Republic*. However, Socrates obfuscates these similarities through his use of rhetoric in the latter part of the dialogue in order to conceal a more fundamental disagreement about the priority and relationship of philosophy and politics. This similarity and obfuscation constitutes an important and overlooked teaching of Plato's *Gorgias*.

Keywords: Plato, Gorgias, Callicles, rhetoric, philosophy, politics

The irony of Plato's *Gorgias* is that it is the seeming villain Callicles who ultimately has the most important things to say about the relationship between politics and philosophy. Most scholars have overlooked the merits of his speech for a variety of reasons. With a few exceptions, scholars of past generations tended to prematurely dismiss Callicles remarks as little more than "Plato's dramatic embodiment of all the immoralist tendencies."¹ Callicles "draws the last consequences of the doctrines of naturalism, relativism, subjectivism, and individualism that are in the air."² Voegelin remarks that Callicles is "the public representative of the corrupt order."³ Friedlander equates Callicles' argument about the "law of nature" to Nietzsche's "will-to-power" and his rejection of convention to Nietzsche's "slave morality."⁴ Some recent scholars argue along these same lines. Ranasinghe remarks that Callicles is a "hedonist and nihilist" and that he "embodies the view that the means justify the end—whatever it is."⁵

Other scholars have looked beyond these pejorative depictions and have made more progress in uncovering the merit of Callicles' understanding of politics. Gentzler, for example, argues that "Socrates ridicules and misrepresents Callicles' views," but nonetheless still concludes that Socrates' defense of the philosophic life and therewith his idealistic approach to politics wins-out over Callicles' views.⁶ Pangle argues that

¹ Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said?* (Chicago, 1933), pp. 141.

² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³ Eric Voegelin, 'The Philosophy of Existence: Plato's *Gorgias*', *The Review of Politics* Vol.11, No.4 (October, 1949) pp. 477-498, p. 481.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260, 262. Voegelin and Shorey also make some comparison between Callicles' view and Nietzsche. See also E.R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 28-29.

⁵ Nalin Ranasinghe, *Socrates in the Underworld: On Plato's Gorgias* (Indiana, 2009), pp. 77-78.

⁶ Jyl Gentzler, 'The Sophistic Cross-Examination of Callicles in the *Gorgias*', *Ancient Philosophy* 15 (1995) pp. 17-43, p. 40; Cf. Walter Newell, *The Ruling Passion: The*

Callicles should be compared with Socrates' interest in, and failed attempt to teach, Alcibiades, which suggests there is more kinship between Callicles and Socrates than appears on the surface. Like Alcibiades, Callicles is perhaps a potential philosopher.⁷ Stauffer argues that Callicles is secretly a moralist contrary to the views of many scholars.⁸ He remarks, "The heart of the problem, as Callicles' response shows, is the painful indignation and fear that arises with the thought that the virtuous do not always receive the fate they deserve or that justice has little power in the world."⁹ Callicles is incapable of philosophy, because he lacks the courage to admit this to himself. He is afraid if he did, he would have to admit that his hidden moral inclinations cannot be satisfied. Thus, it is fear that animates Callicles' indignation and thereby his critique of the philosophic life according to Stauffer.¹⁰

Grote also makes headway when he argues that, despite other commentators' claims, Callicles' speech does not depict the teachings of any known sophists, "or any other common doctrine."¹¹ He points out that Callicles, in fact, deprecates the sophists. Grote further notes that despite Socrates' criticism that Callicles is enthralled by the demos and Athenian political community, "The language which Plato puts into the mouth of Kallikles is noway consistent with the attribute which he ascribes to him—slavish deference to the judgments of the Athenian Demos."¹² He also notes that Callicles is "made to appear repulsive by the language in which he expresses it [his views]", yet his understanding of politics, particularly the motive of fear, is more valid than Socrates concedes.¹³

I will argue that although Socrates does reveal, through his cross-examination, problems with Callicles' views and seems to demonstrate to the audience the superiority of conventional morality to the *Realpolitik* that Callicles endorses, the fervor and rhetorical flare with which he does so is intended to obfuscate the more decisive part of Callicles' critique that Socrates knows to be well founded. Callicles' speech and critique of philosophy is a real, albeit subtle, critique of the philosophic life as Socrates led it. His

Erotics of Statecraft in Platonic Political Philosophy (Maryland, 2000), pp. 9-39; and Richard McKim, 'Shame and the Truth of Plato's *Gorgias*' In *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (Pennsylvania, 2002), pp. 34-48.

⁷ Thomas Pangle, 'Plato's *Gorgias* as a vindication of Socratic Education', *Polis* Vol.10 (1991) pp. 3-21, p. 20.

⁸ Devin Stauffer, 'Socrates and Callicles: A Reading of Plato's *Gorgias*', *Review of Politics* Vol. 64, No. 4 (Autumn, 2002) pp. 627-657.

⁹ Devin Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's Gorgias* (Chicago, 2006), p. 118; Alessandra Fussi remarks, "Given the importance of rhetoric in Callicles' view of his own future, one is led to wonder if that indignation is entirely sincere ['Callicles' Examples of the law of nature in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* Vol. 19, No. 1 (1996) pp. 39-58, p. 54.] Fussi argues that Callicles' attitude toward Socrates is not indignation but "ambivalence" (*Ibid.* p. 55).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 649.

¹¹ George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Socrates* Vol. 1 (London, 1865), p. 114.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.

speech is reminiscent of Nietzsche, as some scholars have argued, but not just the doctrine of “will to power” or “slave morality”. More importantly, it calls to mind Nietzsche’s critique of Socrates in *Twilight of the Idols*.¹⁴ Plato seems to anticipate this sort of critique, and, as I will argue, not simply dismiss or disagree with it.¹⁵ Rather, Callicles’ speech in the *Gorgias* represents in a certain sense the most true teaching about politics in the *Gorgias*.

The *Gorgias*

Like the *Republic* the *Gorgias* addresses the question of what is the most just way of life.¹⁶ Also, in both dialogues Socrates defends justice against a *Realpolitik* approach to politics as advocated by Thrasymachus and Glaucon in the *Republic* and Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias*. However, the manner in which he does so is very different owing to the different interlocutors, different circumstances, and, as I contend, Socrates’ different rhetorical intentions. The *Republic* takes place in private, outside Athens in the Piraeus, and it is a conversation that Socrates is compelled into and does so with some reluctance and reservations (327c, 368b). In contrast, the *Gorgias* is one of the few dialogues Socrates himself instigates. It takes place in Athens, in public, in front of some of the leading young men of Athens who have gathered to hear Gorgias.¹⁷

Not only does Socrates defend conventional morality, but he makes a more extreme and rhetorical argument than in the *Republic* whereby the philosophic life as he led it seems to coalesce with a defense of law-abidingness and is in fact, “the true political art” (521d7).¹⁸ His extreme and uncompromising defense of the law-abiding life creates a confrontation, not just with Polus, the student of the type of rhetoric Gorgias practices, but more importantly with the upstart politician Callicles, which leads to a more explicit critique and challenge of the life that Socrates led, the philosophic life, by

¹⁴ Ch2, “The Problem of Socrates”.

¹⁵ Cf. Mark Lutz, *Socrates’ Education to Virtue: Learning the Love of the Noble* (New York, 1998), pp. 16-24.

¹⁶ Several scholars have noted the similarities in these dialogues and the aid of comparison for understanding their complexities. For example, Friedlander argues that book one of the *Republic* is the most similar dialogue to the *Gorgias* and that Callicles is an “exaggerated” version of Thrasymachos (*Plato*, p. 244). Ranasinghe comments, “It is worth noting that the designed impossibility of assigning the *Gorgias* a dramatic date suggests strongly that it should be read not before or after the *Republic* but beside it (*Socrates in the Underworld*, p. 77).” Fussi remarks, “I think that an accurate comparison between Callicles’ personal myth and the myth of the cave would be of great interest if we wanted to see what exactly is at stake in philosophy which is not at stake in Callicles’ own imitation of philosophy (‘Callicles Examples’, p. 140).”

¹⁷ For an extended discussion of the setting of the *Gorgias* and its peculiarities see Alessandra Fussi, ‘Why Is the *Gorgias* so Bitter?’, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* Vol.33, No.1 (2000) pp. 39-58, particularly §2.

¹⁸ This and all subsequent translations from the Greek are my own from Plato. *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903).

Callicles than is addressed in the *Republic*.¹⁹ Consequently, the tension between politics and philosophy is more sharply contrasted in the *Gorgias*, and we may hope to gain insights we cannot learn from the *Republic* alone. This confrontation makes the *Gorgias* one of the most polemic and therefore political Platonic dialogues, one in which Socrates seems the most eager to refute his interlocutors, especially Callicles, and impress and influence Gorgias and the leading young men of Athens who have gathered to hear him. The very first word of the *Gorgias* in Greek is war (*polemos*).

The initial theme of the *Gorgias* is rhetoric. What is Plato's interest in depicting Socrates' examination and debate about rhetoric with Gorgias? We know from Aristophanes' *Clouds* that Socrates had a reputation as a teacher of rhetoric. In fact, the very criticism that Socrates tacitly makes against Gorgias in the *Gorgias* is the criticism Aristophanes makes against Socrates in the *Clouds*. Socrates argues that rhetoric, at least the way Gorgias teaches and seems to understand it, is morally irresponsible. It gives students power without teaching or ensuring moral responsibility. In theory it is a skill or power to do good or ill for oneself or the city. Yet, in practice this moral neutrality can lead to ill owing to the fact that Gorgias does not teach his students what is just and good (460a). This is what Aristophanes shows through the dramatic effect of Pheidippides' becoming the student of Socrates in the *Clouds*.

Consequently, although several Platonic dialogues are in a sense a reply to the criticisms against Socrates in the *Clouds*, e.g. *The Apology*, the *Gorgias* is particularly aimed at addressing those charges and showing that while Socrates did employ rhetorical arguments, they were not meant, intentionally at least, to be subversive, at least not necessarily, but were arguably an attempt at a new, noble sort of rhetoric, a type of rhetoric in the service of philosophy and the contemplative life. To this end, Socrates makes many remarks in the *Gorgias* as though he were presenting a case in court like the debate between the Just and Unjust Speech in the *Clouds* (see 417e2-472c, 475e8-476a9, 486e7-488b2). This means these remarks and the arguments Socrates makes must be considered not simply on their own merits, as some scholars have done, but particularly in light of the dramatic setting and their intended affect on the audience.

The main intention of rhetoric is not principally to teach but persuade, as Socrates leads Gorgias to admit (453a2). Socrates uses rhetoric in the dialogue for the sake of the audience and also, arguably, for the sake of showing Gorgias a nobler use of rhetoric or way to make the use of rhetoric noble in the sense of truly contributing to the good of the city, not just the individual so skilled. With this in mind, it should not be surprising that the philosophic life as Socrates led it is not simply equivalent to the way Socrates depicts it in the dialogue as coalescing with law-abidingness and conventional morality and that the depiction of politics he endorses is not his final thought on the subject. In fact, the life dedicated to philosophy as Socrates actually lived it is perhaps not simply more just than the political life as Callicles depicts it. The mere fact that Callicles and the others are not entirely persuaded by Socrates' refutation suggests that there is more to Callicles' critique than Socrates is willing to address, in public at least.

¹⁹ In the *Republic* Adeimantus does object at one point and accuses the philosophers of being useless in the city (487d5), a charge Callicles also makes. However, Adeimantus does not explicitly challenge Socrates the way Callicles does.

Callicles' Speech

Callicles is not as rash and impetuous as his speech seems to suggest. He does not badger his way into the conversation like Polus (448a6). He is the last of the three, after Gorgias and Polus, to take up a defense of rhetoric, more precisely a critique of Socrates' uncompromising law-abidingness or conventionality and defense of a *Realpolitik* approach to politics. In fact, it is never altogether clear to what extent Callicles believes in the power of rhetoric. Although he seems to be more shameless than Polus, this is at least in part due to the fact that Polus is not a citizen of Athens (487b1). Polus is inclined to be more reserved. Callicles, on the other hand, is not merely a citizen, but a leading citizen just beginning a political career.²⁰

Socrates praises Callicles as having the qualities necessary for debating the underlying issue at stake in Socrates' understanding of rhetoric, what is the most just way of life (487a3), as he did not Polus or Gorgias.²¹ While Polus and Gorgias praise political power, there is no indication that they have or are pursuing political careers. Callicles has more at stake and more interest in the question, which suggests there is more conviction in his words. Also, he is an erotic man, like Socrates, making him, in a way, a sort of kindred spirit.²² It subsequently becomes evident, or so Socrates seems to demonstrate to the crowd, that Callicles has not fully understood nor thought through what he professes. Nonetheless, he does really take the way of life one chooses seriously, which is not as clear with Polus and Gorgias. Rutherford comments, after Socrates has silenced Gorgias and Polus, "Socrates has now moved to the center-stage, showing himself a much more extraordinary man than Gorgias; and Callicles has moved from being the complacent patron to a state of astounded curiosity."²³

Further, the objection with which Callicles enters the conversation is sincere when he turns to Chairephon and asks, "Tell me, is Socrates being serious about these things or playing (481b7)?"²⁴ Socrates' refutation of Polus is so farfetched, his praise of the just

²⁰ Friedlander, *Plato*, pp. 266-267.

²¹ Stauffer argues that this remark by Socrates is wholly ironic or "the opposite of its surface meaning", questioning in particular that Callicles has received a good education. To the contrary, I think Socrates praise is more or less sincere. *The Unity*, p. 93; cf. Seth Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy: Plato's Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Chicago, 1991), p. 62.

²² Pangle, 'Plato's *Gorgias*', p. 20.

²³ R.B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato: Ten Essays in Platonic Interpretation* (London, 1995), p. 158.

²⁴ Fussi, following up on Rutherford's comment, remarks that Socrates seems to Callicles either "the greatest rhetorician—since he was able to defeat both Gorgias and Polus—and thus he knows exceedingly well the spells and witchcraft whereby one is supposed to tame lions—or he is himself a *lion* [emphasis added], since he was never charmed by the *nomos*. Or perhaps both." She continues, "Callicles discussion with Socrates arises, on his part, out of the need to find out if Socrates can offer him an instrument as omnipotent as Gorgias' rhetoric claimed to be ('Callicles' Examples', p. 136)."

life so extreme, it calls into question its validity and cannot help but provoke an attack.²⁵ Is Socrates arguing what he in fact really thinks to be true, or is he just making a sophisticated rhetorical display? If the latter is the case, to what purpose? Without examining the argument further, there is no way to judge the sincerity and validity of Socrates' claims.

Callicles' resurrection of Polus' argument is similar to Glaucon's resurrection of Thrasymachus' argument in the *Republic*. While Callicles is more forthcoming in his praise of injustice, the motive is similar. Can Socrates back up his praise of justice and his radically idealistic approach to politics? Despite his unabashed praise of tyranny, like Glaucon, Callicles has a genuine interest in justice, at least to the extent that it contributes to his own good and good of his family, friends, and city. Thus, his praise of tyranny is exaggerated like Glaucon's comparison between the just and unjust man: an exaggeration for the sake of clarity, i.e. compelling Socrates to clarify his own views. As Friedlander puts it, men who truly believe what Callicles condones would not enter into a discussion of it at all, because to do so would "acknowledge the validity of a law that must, ultimately, cause their downfall."²⁶

Consequently, Callicles makes an unabashed praise of rhetoric, or tyranny to be precise, and thereby the life devoted to politics, despite jeopardizing his own reputation, because of his interest in the truth of the matter. Socrates acknowledges this: "When there is present, therefore, mine and your agreement, already it will hold the completion of truth (487e7)." Since Socrates himself has made an extreme and rhetorical defense of conventional justice, it is not surprising that Callicles makes an extreme and rhetorical praise of injustice. This is not because Callicles is really that base, which Socrates' subsequent examination reveals, but simply to uncover, if possible, the truth.

Callicles' speech against Socrates has three parts. The first is his distinction between nature (*phusis*) and convention (*nomos*) and its implications (482e3-484c2). The second is his critique of the life devoted to philosophy (484c3-485e2). The third is his exhortation to Socrates to take more of an interest in politics and renounce philosophy as a way of life (485e3-486d1).

Nature and Convention

The first thing Callicles does is accuse Socrates of acting like a "true demagogue" (482c3), an accusation he twice repeats. Socrates, ironically, to a certain extent admits as much towards the end of the dialogue when he says that he alone of the current

²⁵ Stauffer, *The Unity*, p. 651.

²⁶ *Plato*, p. 261; Stauffer argues more extensively for Callicles hidden attachment to justice, as I have mentioned. However, I do not see the sense of indignation to the extent he does. To be interested in justice to the extent that it contributes to one's own good is not the same as indignation. Stauffer points to Callicles' response at 511b1, "Isn't this, indeed, the irritating thing?" to Socrates' admission that the one gratifying the rulers will get the better of the one who does not, as a key piece of evidence for his thesis (*The Unity*, pp. 117-118). Yet, I read that remark as half-hearted, because at that point in the conversation Callicles has long since stopped taking Socrates' arguments seriously and is just going along with them for the sake of Gorgias.

politicians practices “the true art of politics (521d6)”. By that point it has become clear that what his discussions with Polus and Gorgias aimed at was not so much to learn from them the true power of rhetoric, but to debunk in front of the gathered crowd the sham rhetoric taught by Polus and Gorgias with the new and improved Socratic rhetoric. Since he is speaking to an audience, he could not teach them the truth about the relationship between justice and rhetoric (he does not even address the question what is justice as he does in the *Republic*), he must just persuade (454d-455a).

Callicles notes the sophistry Socrates applied, namely the ambiguity between nature and convention (483a1-5), in refuting Polus. Demos remarks, “The opposition between *phusis* and *nomos* is reflected in the discrepancy between Polus’ true sentiments and his reluctance to proclaim them. One infers that *phusis* somehow corresponds to Polus’ view of reality while *nomos*, designating ‘the general consensus’, impedes him stating his view.”²⁷ Socrates intentionally avoids raising or addressing the question of what justice is precisely to get away with this sort of sophistry. Consequently, it is not at all clear to what extent Socrates really believes in, and condones, conventional justice from his discussion with Polus as opposed to a more enlightened, philosophic understanding of justice such as that which emerges in the *Republic*. The fact that he never concedes that the tyrant Archelaus is unjust suggests that he does not simply believe conventional justice is true justice, whatever that might be, despite the fact that he later draws parallels between justice as law-abidingness and health of the soul.

Further, considered in comparison to the image of justice that emerges in the *Republic*, it is difficult to say Archelaus is simply unjust. In the *Republic* Socrates argues for a type of justice that is the order of one’s own soul, not principally the relationship between souls or different people: the *kallipolis* does not consider the good or “justice” it owes to other cities. Socrates does suggest that the *kallipolis* should be more merciful to other Greek cities than barbarians. Nonetheless, the question or problem of justice as a relationship between different people or cities is largely dropped and substituted for an internal and selfish conception of justice.²⁸

Callicles then attempts to avoid this sophistry by defining convention or law (*nomos*). “I think those establishing the laws are the weak human beings and the many. Therefore, it is for themselves and their own profit that they establish laws and praise their praises and blame their blames, frightening away the more forceful human beings (483b8-83c2).” This is similar to the social contract type argument that Glaucon makes in the *Republic* (359a1-5), which is in no way essentially wrong, especially for democracies like Athens, or decisively refuted in the *Republic* or *Gorgias*.

Callicles then remarks, “But I think nature herself reveals that it is just for the better (*ameinō*) to have more than the inferior (*keironos*) (483d1).” Callicles endorses leading a life according to nature as opposed to convention, the two being “mostly opposed”. This idea is nothing revolutionary.²⁹ Further, it bears two striking similarities

²⁷ Marian Demos, ‘Callicles Quotation of Pindar in the *Gorgias*’, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* Vol. 96 (1994) pp. 85-107, p. 87.

²⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Nic. Ethics* Bk 9.4.

²⁹ Demos, ‘Callicles Quotation’, pp. 85-107; For discussions of the distinction between nature (*phusis*) and convention (*nomos*) in Greek literature of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. see Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, pp. 55-134 (especially pp.

to Socrates' own views. In the *Republic* Socrates also makes the argument that the just life is according to nature and the life ruled by convention is tantamount to being a slave. With his famous cave (lit. "cave like structure") analogy, he argues that citizens of a city are literally like slaves of the *nomos*.³⁰ Only by escaping from, literally throwing-off the shackles of (*Republic* 514a6), convention and ascending to nature and life by nature, does one attain the truly just way of life, which turns-out to be the philosophic life. Callicles likewise argues, despite the immoralist veneer of his speech, which seems to eschew all notions of justice, that the life according to nature is the most just way of life (483d1, 484b1). His description is even reminiscent of the philosophers' escape from the cave: "When some man arises with a nature of sufficient force, he shakes off all that we have taught him, bursts his bonds and breaks free (484a3-4)." Fussi comments, "Callicles may well represent, both in his expressed theories and in his instantiation of those theories as a character in the dialogue, the philosopher's alter ego."³¹

Second, Socrates even makes the same argument about having more for oneself. In the *Hipparchus*, which is about profiteering or gain, Socrates leads an unnamed Comrade to the conclusion that all men, good and wicked, desire the most for themselves. In the process he praises the tyrant Hipparchus. The word *nomos* is conspicuously absent from the dialogue and Socrates focuses on things that are good by *nature* (*phusis*), a word that occurs several times, beginning with a farming analogy (225c5-10).³² It has been

101-107 and 131-134 which mentions Callicles); and Kerford, *The Sophistic Movement*, pp. 112-130.

³⁰ The actual word, cave-like (*spālaiōdā*), leaves open the question, if not suggests, that the city is artificial and simply made to look like something natural.

³¹ Fussi, 'Callicles' Examples', p. 140; Consider the descriptions of the corruption of those with philosophic natures and of the tyrant as a perverted philosopher in the *Republic* (494b1-d5, 495b8-c7, 573a3-c8). For an interesting discussion of this darker side of the philosopher see Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics*, p. 61.

³² Socrates proceeds to ask the Comrade about horsemen, pilots, generals, musicians and all artisans who work with tools and instruments and seek profit. Ranching requires more expertise than farming, navigation more than ranching and generalship still more than navigation. Thus, the analogies progress from the simple to the sophisticated. Further, while a single man can farm, ranching requires a family. Navigation requires still more people, and to wage war an army. Hence, the analogies also progress from the parochial to the urban. This progression parallels the transition from the city of utmost necessity to the feverish city in the *Republic*. While the city of utmost necessity had need of farmers, the more sophisticated arts like horse-breeding, navigation, and generalship, only emerge in the feverish city.

The first art mentioned is farming, whose product or aim is subsistence. The next arts mentioned are horse-breeding and sea-faring, whose aim is mastery, i.e. mastery of horses and the sea. Yet, the final examples of musicians and artisans proper seek beauty. Thus, there are essentially three different types of profiteers: seekers of subsistence, those who seek to dominate, and those who seek the beautiful and harmonious. This corresponds to the three classes of citizens in the *Republic*: the wage-earners motivated by bodily needs, guardians motivated by spiritedness and love of honor, and the philosophers motivated by love of wisdom and knowledge of the whole. The hierarchy of

suggested that Hipparchus is a caricature of Socrates himself.³³ Socrates was, of course, accused of corrupting the youth and impiety and came to be admired for his wisdom.³⁴ Both the tyrant and philosopher look to nature as a guide that transcends conviction or what the city dictates. The tyrant looks for physical goods, or possessions, the philosopher intellectual, which leads him to question the city's laws, its gods, and the way of life proscribed by and dedicated to the city.

Consequently, the real difference between Callicles and Socrates is that Socrates is more radical, or radical in a different way, in his rejection of convention. The problem for Callicles, arguably, is that he has not sufficiently thought through what it means to free himself from convention. Callicles claims the superior man should disregard convention and live solely by nature (484a). Yet, the consequence is that the superior man seizes the most for himself, not necessarily of what is best by nature, as we would expect, but apparently of what is best by convention, "possessions" (484c3). In particular, he mentions Heracles who took Geryon's cows (484c1). The example shows how conventional minded Callicles is, because Heracles did not take the cows for himself, as a real tyrant would, but as a penance, i.e. so as to conform to convention. It was the tenth of his famous labors.

Thus, Callicles' superior man is still a slave to convention, because his desires are formed by convention and are the same as the many he looks down on. In a way the difference between Socrates and Callicles seems to be reflected in the distinction between the city of utmost necessity and the feverish city with luxuries and vice that subsequently emerges from it in the *Republic* (372c-e). Callicles superior man, if not Callicles himself, is a product of the feverish city: he is not natural. If he were as radical as Callicles thinks he is, he would not necessarily care about the same things the many do, one of which may be political power, as comes to light in the *Republic* (587d9-e3, 586a1-b3).

However, the problem with this argument is that there were no philosophers in the city of utmost necessity. Philosophy, particularly Socratic philosophy, philosophy as the examination of speeches and different opinions, is a product of the feverish city. Many things are more necessary than philosophy and required for philosophy to flourish. In the *kallipolis* philosophers need not concern themselves with the workaday world, because the city provides for their every need. But, real cities do not. One must be a human being before being a philosopher, and human beings require "possessions", which generally entails being part of a city and paying some attention to political things.

Callicles continues his argument against convention by saying, "for the stronger to rule the weaker and to have more. After using what sort of justice did Xerxes lead his

souls in the *Republic* reflects the hierarchy of profiteering. Only the first and last arts mentioned do not require the city and do not promote war: they are peaceful arts (cf. Cicero *De Officiis* 1.42; Benardete 1971, 60). The different ways that men understand profit lead to the cultivation of different arts, which in turn reflect different types of lives. Consequently, although the *Hipparchus* is considered spurious by some scholars, it nonetheless seems very much written in the spirit and understanding of other Platonic dialogues and helpful for understanding them.

³³ Allan Bloom, 'The Political Philosopher in Democratic Society: The Socratic View', In *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960-1990* (New York, 1996), pp. 105-123, p. 46-47.

³⁴ Cf. Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.2.14.

army against Greece, or his father against Scythians (483d7-483e1)?” Again, Callicles gives an ironic example, “because both Darius and Xerxes were defeated by the weaker inhabitants of Scythia and Greece.”³⁵ This indicates the ambiguity in what it really means to be superior by nature, which Callicles has not thought through and Socrates uses to his advantage later.³⁶

Callicles then makes his most famous and ironic statement. “These men I think do these things according to the nature of the just, and yes, by Zeus, according to the law of nature (483e4).”³⁷ What he thinks he means by this is not that they are necessarily successful in their endeavors, as the examples he gives shows, but that their desires and actions are not bound or dictated by convention: that is the law of nature. Socrates, in his desire to know many things, his philosophy, shows that he himself lives by this law in that he is not satisfied with what the city teaches is good, the best way of life, the ultimate causes of all things, the gods, and many other things he questions in the other dialogues.

Critique of Philosophy

Callicles then proceeds to a critique of philosophy or the philosophic life as Socrates led it. As many commentators have noted, “Callicles is not simply an opponent of philosophy.”³⁸ He does not simply choose the active life over and against the contemplative life. Rather he says, “philosophy is a graceful thing if someone engages in it in due measure at the proper age.” Nonetheless, to waste too much time on it is “to become inexperienced in all those things that one who is to become a gentleman (*kaloskagathos*) must have experience of (484c8-d2).” Socrates himself tacitly admits as much, or leads interlocutors to a similar conclusion, in the *Lovers* where the question of what is philosophy, or what it means to philosophize, is discussed.³⁹ Socrates leads an argument that suggests that just as not “much” exercise but rather “a measured amount” is good for the body as well as not “much” food but “a measured amount”, so it seems not much learning (or “things” related to learning), but “a measured amount” is good for the soul (134d7). This is the first of three definitions of philosophy suggested in the

³⁵ Fussi, ‘Callicles’ Examples’, p. 122.

³⁶ However, Demos argues that this example adds emphasis to his “survival of the fittest theory”, because Xerxes and Darius were enemies of Greece. Thus, Callicles is condoning their imperialistic impulse despite its danger to Greece (‘Callicles’ Quotation’, p. 89, n12).

³⁷ The interjection of “by Zeus (or by the god)” may seem to give Callicles speech a religious overtone (cf. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias*, pp. 266-267). However, I am inclined to think it is ironic or facetious.

³⁸ James Nichols, ‘The Rhetoric of Justice in Plato’s *Gorgias*’, In *Plato: Gorgias* (New York, 1998), pp. 131-149, p. 142.

³⁹ Like the *Hipparchus* the *Lovers* is considered by some scholars to be spurious. Nonetheless, other scholars argue for its authenticity [see Pangle “Introduction”, *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues* (New York, 1987).] If spurious, like the *Hipparchus*, nonetheless it seems to be written in the spirit of the other dialogues, and therefore of value for shedding light on Plato’s teachings and intentions as a whole.

dialogue. Callicles, likewise, advocates a measured amount of philosophy as long as it does not impede duty toward, and advancement in, the affairs of the city: “I think the most correct thing is to partake of both (485a5).”

In particular, the problem with excessive philosophizing, according to Callicles, is that it makes one “cowardly (lit. unmanly)”, even if they have a good nature, and therefore “useless” both to the city and in the city (485d6). Socrates makes a similar warning in the *Republic* about allowing the guardians to study music to the neglect of athletic competition (*gumnastikos*), because it makes them effeminate, lacking courage and useless to the city: “When he [the guardian] continues [music] without letting up and is seduced, until he dissolves it [spiritedness] completely and cuts out, as it were, the sinews from his soul and makes it ‘a weak warrior’ (411b1-4)”.

Further, this problem of uselessness is actually the second of the three definitions of philosophy arrived at in the *Lovers* by a line of argument instigated by Socrates. After leading his interlocutors, two lads, to the conclusion that philosophy is not “much” learning, but “a measured amount”, Socrates asks “what sort of things the one philosophizing must learn (153a8-9)?” It is suggested that the philosopher would learn “many things”, but this proves problematic because the polymath always turns-out to be second rate—and therefore useless—compared to specialists. Consequently, Socrates concludes, “We agreed that philosophy is noble and that we ourselves are philosophers; that philosophers are good, the good are useful and the worthless useless; again we agreed that philosophers are useless as long as there are artisans but that there are always artisans (137a4-6).”⁴⁰ Philosophers turn out to be “worthless and useless” (137b1). Socrates does subsequently reject this conclusion, but not by way of argument or examination. He simply says, “But I suspect that this isn’t so.” Then, he turns to another line of argument. It is perhaps misleading to conclude that philosophy is simply worthless. Nonetheless the fact that Socrates instigated the line of argument that led to this conclusion and then simply turns away from it abruptly without further consideration makes one pause and, I think, suggests there is something revealing about it and philosophy as Socrates understands it. Further, although Socrates does later respond to Callicles’ criticism of philosophy in his cross-examination, he does not attempt to disprove the charge of its uselessness. Commenting on the later cross examination, Stauffer remarks, “It is worth recalling that Socrates has taken up only part of Callicles’ charge against philosophy: the reproach of vulnerability rather than that of uselessness.”⁴¹

The ultimate difference between Callicles’ and Socrates’ view of philosophy is not its worth per se, but its purpose: Callicles argues that it should be directed toward the good of the city and be in the service of politics. He anticipates later thinkers like Machiavelli. In contrast, Socrates refuses to subordinate philosophy to a higher good.⁴²

⁴⁰ Grote suggests that this definition is given as a critique of the definition of philosophy given by some sophists (*Plato*, p. 449).

⁴¹ *The Unity*, p. 149.

⁴² In the final section of the *Lovers* Socrates argues that philosophy is not knowledge of the arts but rather self-knowledge, which is moderation (*sophrosyne*) and knowledge of how to make others good, which is justice (138b1-e5). If this is true, it would seem to be of great value to the city. However, as the *Cleitophon* suggests, it is far from clear that Socrates can deliver on these claims. Consequently, the final definition given in the

I think this ultimately accounts for a large part of the apparent difference between Socrates' approach to politics, his unyielding defense of conventional morality, and Callicles' *Realpolitik*.

The Exhortation to Political Life

In the final part of his speech Callicles compares himself to Zethus and Socrates to Amphion, these being two characters that debate the contemplative versus the active life in Euripides' lost play *Antiope* (485e4-5). In part, this is an aspect of his exaggeration for the sake of clarity. As suggested, since Socrates has made such an extreme defense of conventional morality to the neglect of the exigencies of politics, Callicles encourages the opposite extreme.⁴³ Yet one must keep in mind that in the central part of his speech, the section dealing specifically with the criticism of philosophy, Callicles equally criticizes those who never study philosophy as being slavish, or not free-born, and unfit to rule (485c9). In fact, later when subsequently pressed by Socrates to define more precisely what he means by "superior", Callicles does not equate it with strength, as would traditionally be the case for Greek heroes like Heracles, but rather prudence (*phronimos*) (489e).

In fact, the argument Callicles makes is actually similar to the argument Socrates makes for philosopher-kings in the *Republic* to the extent that it is a combination of both philosophy and political rule. Albeit, the philosopher-king in the *Republic* only rules, or returns to the cave, because of necessity (540b5), not from a desire to rule, whereas Callicles seems to have a real desire to rule. He is an upstart politician. Socrates accuses him of being in love with the demos (481d6), which may be to some extent true. However, Callicles never concedes this point. Also, there is no historical evidence of such a person as Callicles to support it by reference to his political activities. Consequently, it is difficult to know to what extent Socrates' accusation is true. In fact, I think it is partly, if not largely, rhetorical. It inclines the audience to call into question the validity of Callicles' judgment, and more importantly it antagonizes Callicles to make his harangue against Socrates.

More importantly, Callicles himself never says that ruling itself is simply good. In fact, his argument for rule is based more on necessity like the argument in the *Republic*. He does not argue that it is good for its own sake, but rather that it is

Lovers proves problematic, which points back to the second, central definition. As Clifford Orwin remarks on the problem Cleitophon reveals in the *Cleitophon* about Socratic philosophy, "Philosophy is not, as Socrates' protreptic seems to suggest, a means to specifying the virtuous life: it takes the place of that life." Orwin continues, "While exhorting to the scrutiny of those common opinions that support such agreement as does unite citizens, philosophy proves unable to replace them. It fosters not harmony but a new kind of discord—between itself and the city ('On the *Cleitophon*' In *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues* (New York, 1987), pp. 117-131, p. 131). Alfarabi refers to the philosophers as a type of "weed" in the virtuous city (*The Political Regime*, §9), cf. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 1.34,75 and 3.34,534.

⁴³ Cf. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b1-7.

“unmanly” or “uncourageous” not to rule. By not paying attention to politics, or by not being politically minded, a man cannot effectively pursue what is in his best interests and interest of his friends, family, and community (486a7-b3). This is the gist of the final part of Callicles’ speech and his exhortation to Socrates. We cannot help but think of how Socrates himself lived in extreme poverty, was ultimately convicted and sentenced to death, and thereby abandoned his family.⁴⁴ Also, it recalls Socrates’ own argument for ruling in book one of the *Republic* that a good man will rule only so as not to pay the penalty of being ruled by lesser men (347b-c).

As mentioned, Grote suggests that the underlying motive of Callicles’ concern for politics is fear, not honor, which is revealed in the last part of his speech. I suggest it is not so much a fear that his secret aspirations of justice and virtue cannot be realized, as Stauffer argues, but rather a fear motivated by love and concern for his family, friends, and community, which seems to be what Grote had in mind, although he does not elaborate. Recalling Aristophanes and his gripe against Socrates, Lutz argues in his interpretation of Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* that Socrates, because of his attachment to philosophy, seems to be obtuse to most men’s love of their own and its relationship to justice. Yet, his need for students, or to persuade others of the worth of the philosophic life, belies his apparent detachment from love of one’s own. He wishes to make others like himself, which is arguably a form of love of one’s own he does not acknowledge. Consequently, to Aristophanes at least, he is less self-aware than he realizes.⁴⁵

A similar suggestion comes to light in the *Hipparchus* by noting Socrates’ similarity to Hipparchus. Socrates tells us that Hipparchus was a lover of wisdom, although he does not use the word philosopher or philosophy (presumably so as not to draw attention to the kinship between tyranny and philosophy). Hipparchus wished to share his wisdom with his fellow citizens. He wanted to educate his citizens and thereby be admired for his wisdom.⁴⁶ To this end he installed Hermae with new sayings to replace the traditional teachings from the temple at Delphi. That is to say, the tyrant Hipparchus replaced the wisdom of the city, its law and that of its gods, with his wisdom and his

⁴⁴ See *Crito* 45c8-d6. An underlying issue, which Socrates does not address, is the role of chance or fortune. Arguably, the philosopher is less subject to chance than the tyrant or statesman, because he is less in need of external goods. Nonetheless, this is precisely because he does not care for, nor is attached to, his friends and family the way ordinary men are. Further, while being a philosopher may give one a type of autonomy that most men do not have, becoming a philosopher requires many conditions, or good fortune, beyond one’s control. For a discussion of the role of chance in relation to happiness or the best life see Robert Bartlett, ‘Aristotle’s Introduction to the Problem of Happiness: On Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*’, *American Journal of Political Science* Vol.52 (July, 2008), pp. 671-687.

⁴⁵ Lutz, *Socrates’ Education*, pp. 73-75; Eros is a passion particularly strong in the young, as Aristotle notes (*Nic. Ethics* 1156a32-1156b5). Appealing to that passion (e.g. characterizing philosophy as the highest manifestation of it as Socrates does via Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*) is a good way of seducing the young.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Protagoras* 343c; and Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, Das Problem des Sokrates, §7.

teaching: Hipparchus takes the place of the gods. Did not Socrates perpetrate something similar in Athens?

Does Socrates really know that justice is not rooted in love of one's own, especially owing to the fact that it is very difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible, to fully distinguish between love of one's own and love of what is good?⁴⁷ It is Callicles' fear that it is unjust to pursue philosophy to the neglect of love of his family, friends and community that lies at the heart of his criticism, which is more serious and worthy of consideration than Socrates allows the audience to consider. He tyrannizes the conversation for the sake of philosophy or the benefit of the way of life *he* considers the best.

Callicles' Virtue

Socrates begins his cross examination of Callicles by compelling him to define more precisely what he meant by "stronger" or "superior". In so doing, Callicles clarifies his view, saying:

First, the stronger are neither cobblers nor cooks, but those who are prudent in the affairs of the city, and who can determine in what way they will be managed—and not only prudent but also manly [or courageous], being capable of completing what they have in mind and not growing weary through softness of soul. (491a7-b4)

Stauffer remarks, "We can see with particular clarity here that Callicles is not simply a debunker of justice and virtue but that he believes in a kind of justice based on a certain view of virtue (2006, 101)." The specific type of virtue endorsed is better understood by considering the men Callicles admires such as Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Pericles.

These men, and men like them, are keenly aware of necessity, of what must be done in certain situations, knowing full well that one cannot always choose the best way, but sometimes must choose the lesser of evils, to be willing to depart from good, as Machiavelli would say. For example, Themistocles persuaded the Athenians to build a navy even though it had some detrimental consequences.⁴⁸ It established the conditions for imperialistic expansion, which did inadvertently facilitate greed and hubris among the citizens. Yet without this power, as Stauffer observes, "Athens would never have risen to prominence and power, or perhaps even have survived."⁴⁹ This ability to recognize necessity and do what must be done without being too committed to specific principles that prevent one from adapting to changing circumstances is an essential quality of effective leaders. It means not being committed to an idealistic approach to politics that Socrates endorses with his unyielding defense of conventional morality.

⁴⁷ Lutz, *Socrates' Education*, p. 76.

⁴⁸ Thucydides 1.19, 1.93. For Thucydides' description of Themistocles' virtues see 1.138.

⁴⁹ *The Unity*, p. 53, n33.

While Socrates exhortation to justice and law-abidingness is, perhaps, not ultimately a high-minded naïveté, it no doubt seems so to Callicles. It probably appears to Callicles as a Nician type virtue, the general appointed to lead the Sicilian expedition which ended disastrously due to his excessive caution and piety. To the extent that the life Socrates exhorts calls to mind Nicias in contrast to Themistocles, it not only seems to Callicles imprudent, but also unjust: it endangers the city. Nicias' lack of ingenuity and excessive commitment to convention caused many good men to lose their lives, as well as his own, and great harm to Athens.⁵⁰

After Callicles explicitly states what he means by superior, Socrates abruptly turns the conversation away from a discussion of justice to a discussion of moderation, a turn that has puzzled many commentators: "Socrates procedure here is one of the most puzzling features of his entire conversation with Callicles."⁵¹ The reason for the abrupt turn, I think, is simply so as not to examine Callicles' understanding of virtue better. To do so would be to start to uncover the flaws with commitment to unyielding conventional morality for which Socrates has been arguing. Socrates might then be compelled to reveal that his true understanding of justice, and the philosophic life, has more in common with the Machiavellian appropriation Callicles favors than he wants to admit before the audience.

Instead Socrates turns to a demagogic discussion of moderation. He gives various myths that endorse moderation, which he knows will not have much affect on Callicles (494a5-7). They can and do, however, deflect the audience's attention from the salient features of Callicles' understanding of virtue. Yet despite his rhetorical flare, considered carefully the argument Socrates makes against Callicles' call for immoderation "is not an impressive refutation of hedonism".⁵²

Socrates then turns the discussion of moderation into an attack on the men Callicles admires and therewith Callicles' conception of virtue.

Tell me this in addition, if the Athenians are said to have become better because of Pericles, or altogether the opposite to have been ruined by him. For I at any rate hear these things, that Pericles made the Athenians lazy,

⁵⁰ Arguably, Nicias is not fully to blame for the failure of the Sicilian expedition. Plutarch does not hold him fully accountable and points to his deteriorating health as one reason for his failures. However, Plutarch does say that he was excessively timorous, which seems to be related to his excessive piety and law-abidingness, which led him to submit to, and help advance, base men. In particular, Plutarch faults him for helping Cleon's advancement, which was very detrimental to Athens. At any rate, Nicias' failings seem to show that excessive piety and law-abidingness is not just foolish or imprudent, but dangerous, especially for statesmen or anyone responsible for the lives and well-being of others.

⁵¹ Stauffer, *The Unity*, p. 102; see also Kahn, 'The Drama and Dialect', pp. 102-3; Klosko, 'The Refutation of Callicles', p. 127; and Gentzler, 'The Sophistic Cross Examination', p. 36.

⁵² Stauffer 2006, 112; for a discussion of the problems and short comings of Socrates' critique of hedonism see Stauffer 2006, 110-113 and Gentzler 1995, 36-38.

cowardly, gossipers, and greedy. (515e2-5)

While there may be some truth to these accusations, they are hardly the whole story.⁵³ Nonetheless, it prepares the audience for Socrates' most outlandish and ironic claim that he alone of the Athenians practices the "true political art" (521d8). This would seem to be the one that makes citizens better, and yet this is far from his true affect. The way Socrates actually lived the philosophic life did not address all the citizens the way statesmen do. Mainly he conversed with promising youth, sophists, and occasionally politicians. When he does so, "Socrates does not seem to lead his fellow citizens all the way to virtue. Rather, he does two perhaps interconnected things: he produces perplexity in the young, and he abuses those who are older by making bitter speeches in public and in private."⁵⁴ Stauffer continues, "Considered in light of these indications, however, Socrates' activity, while in some sense directed to the improvement of the young, cannot be regarded as an effort to inculcate virtue in any ordinary sense of the term... In other words, he is trying to show that his situation in the city is in fact *a problem*—a problem of which his 'true political art' is the cause, not the solution."⁵⁵ Consequently, Socrates' argument about the "true political art" is so far from being a refutation of Callicles' critique of philosophy, it is in essential respects a tacit validation of it, as Stauffer correctly argues. It is precisely this problem, the problem of Socrates, the potentially subversive effects of his philosophizing in the city, unintended or not, that makes his use of a nobler sort of rhetoric defending law-abidingness and conflating it with the philosophic life he leads so necessary and such a large part of the dialogue.

Conclusion

Callicles' speech critiquing Socrates uncompromising defense of conventional morality and philosophic way of life makes many validate points about the relationship between philosophy, human nature, and the need for a pragmatic, Machiavellian like approach to politics, which Socrates does not adequately address by the end of the dialogue despite the rhetorical flare of his cross examination. In fact, when carefully examined in light of Socrates' own arguments in other dialogues such as the *Republic*, *Hipparchus*, and *Lovers*, similarities between Callicles' understanding of politics, justice, and the best way of life come to light, which Socrates intentionally obfuscates in the latter half of the dialogue, such as the relationship between tyrannical and philosophic ambition and the precariousness or problematic nature of philosophy as a way of life as opposed to political ambition or attachment and dedication to one's family, friends, and community. A Machiavellian will, of course, never admit to being a Machiavellian. To the contrary, they will appear and profess to be the exact opposite.

Callicles' argument is similar to Socrates' own way of life in as much as both reject convention for the sake of nature as a guide. Further, Callicles does not simply condemn philosophy, but acknowledges the benefit of philosophy. His argument is similar to Socrates' own argument for philosopher-kings in the *Republic*: both being a

⁵³ Consider Thucydides 2.65.

⁵⁴ Stauffer, *The Unity*, p. 164.

⁵⁵ *The Unity*, pp. 164-165.

sort of combination of the contemplative and active life. The difference lies ultimately in the purpose of philosophy. Callicles argues that it should be coupled with and in the service of politics, which leads to an endorsement of *Realpolitik* foreshadowing Machiavelli and similar moderns, e.g. Thomas Hobbes. Socrates refuses to subordinate philosophy to any higher consideration be it love of one's family, friends, or community. To men like Callicles, this makes philosophy and philosophers useless to the city, if not dangerous, a criticism Socrates tacitly acknowledges in the *Lovers*.

Despite Callicles' silence and acquiescence to Socrates' view of politics by the end of the dialogue, Callicles is hardly persuaded. What the debate reveals is not the superiority of Socrates' apparent idealism to Callicles' realism, which Callicles, along with at least some of the audience no doubt rightly knows has not really been refuted. Rather, we see the power of Socrates' rhetoric, which conceals a deeper kinship between Callicles and Socrates on the one hand, and also an ultimately unreconciled debate about the priority and relationship between philosophy and politics on the other.

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